

Subject: *What's A Script*

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Date: October 5, 1998

To: Tomkins-Talk

Recently Vick Kelly sent me a description of how it feels to try to understand script theory (sorry I've forgotten the name of the originator of the clever notion, a name Vick did carefully give to me.) It's like trying to attach Jell-O to a wall with a nail and hammer.

For me, that's really an inspired metaphor to capture the feel of what it's like to understand scripts. Sometime ago I put together a series of brief e-mails explaining the script concept for my brother, a physician who is enjoying and profiting greatly from my discussions with him about affect theory. I have hesitated to share these with my fellow TT-ers because I took some liberties in interpreting script theory that may amount to egregious fallacies in the view of veteran Tomkins students. I take liberties when introducing new ideas to others.

I used to tell my introductory psychology students at the beginning of a course that almost everything they would learn in my course was wrong—wrong because it was too simplified, too incomplete, or too much translated into ordinary language in order to make it intelligible at the cost of rendering it inaccurate. But we have to begin somewhere, and starting out with simpler versions of something is a useful way to build familiarity until we are ready to delve into more advanced study. I am also fond of saying that a few words of error can save thousands of words of tediously detailed explanation. One has to be careful where one places the error, of course, in order not to simplify a theory beyond all resemblance to its true version.

I decided to risk censure and shame for having taken liberties with the finely tuned precision of Tomkins's own words and nonetheless present this description of script theory at Tomkins-Talk. My hope is that doing so will serve a number of purposes. First I do hope it will inspire more lurkers to join us with questions or examples or challenges to my version of the elements of script theory. Second, I hope it will help clarify the concept of script to new-comers, who, like veteran Tomkinsians as well, can find script theory maddeningly elusive.

In so clarifying (if they are clarifying!) I hope this description will also inspire newcomers to ask demanding and challenging questions to help further clarify script theory. And I hope that senior students will put me straight in places where I have missed the point of script theory or where I have taken liberties beyond the acceptable pale. I also am hopeful that those acquainted with specific scripts (affluence scripts, addiction scripts, etc.) will bring their explanations of these to fill in my series in which I do not address any type of script in particular.

What's a Script?

A SCRIPT IS A SET OF RULES.

Other words for "rules" are "algorithms" or "interpretive guidelines" or "instructions." The rules in a script tell us what affects to generate with our own neocortical activity, what behaviors to carry out in what situations, and what to think about to understand what's going on with us.

For example, we could have many rules that say:

- When you are angry, become very humiliated and . . .
- When you are angry, hit someone (or don't hit someone) . . .
- When you are humiliated, think about killing yourself . . .
- When you are in doubt about anything, get terrified . . .
- When you get terrified, do not ask for help or . . .
- When you want to do something that interests you, don't . . .
- Etc., etc., etc.

These are basically rules designed to *solve a problem*.

THE RULES OF A SCRIPT WERE ONCE MORE OR LESS CONSCIOUS BUT EVENTUALLY COME TO EXIST OUTSIDE OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

When Rules Are First Conscious

When rules are first formed they are interpretations about what's happening and instructions about what to do, think, and feel about it. When rules are first formed, they are formed in consciousness.

When rules are first formed in consciousness this process takes place while one goes over in one's mind or, that is, while one *reviews* in one's mind, what is happening or has just happened. When *reviewing* what is happening or has just happened, a person creates a *narration*. When creating a *narration*, a person is the telling him/herself a story and a set of ideas about what to think, feel, and do about what is happening or has just happened. In sum: Rules are first formed in a *narrative review in consciousness* of what is happening or what just happened.

When Rules Later Exist Outside of Consciousness

After rules are formed and used several times, they become automatic. The process of becoming automatic is called automaticity. The automaticity of the rules of a script is similar to the automaticity of the rules of grammar we use to form sentences when we use language. Language learning and script learning are analogous in several ways:

- 1) Language rules, like script rules, in an adult are used with automaticity.
- 2) Language rules, like script rules, are first learned with the help of trial and error, imitation, individual creativity, and repeated experience.
- 3) Learning new language rules, like learning new script rules, usually requires much conscious effort and affective involvement for a typical adult.
- 4) Language rules, like script rules, become so automatic that many persons are completely unaware of their early language or script learning experiences, and many are also unaware of the actual language or script rules themselves that are nonetheless used proficiently.

A summary is first in order of what has been presented so far. A script is a set of rules (or algorithms or interpretive guidelines or instructions to oneself) telling oneself what to do, think, or feel in particular situations. These rules are formed first during a conscious narrative review of what is happening or what just happened. Eventually these rules become so automatic (they acquire automaticity) that they are no longer conscious. This is analogous to the way language rules are learned. It is hard to learn new script rules just as it is hard to learn a new language.

I will now discuss the phrase “what is happening” and “what just happened” because “what happens” is the *content matter* of a script—the stuff about which and for which script rules are invented.

What Is It That Happens When Rules Are Formed?

What does it mean to say that rules interpret what happens or what just happened? Stated differently, what is it that happens when rules are formed?

When rules are formed to interpret events, the something that happens or that just happened is something that has special characteristics. We don't start using rules for absolutely everything or anything that happens to us. We start using rules to interpret only some of the stuff that happens to us. For something to happen so that a rule will be formed to interpret what happens, the stuff that happens must be *a scene within a family of scenes available for scripting*.

The word *family* in the above emphasized portion of the last sentence refers to a group of scenes that all have something in common. What things must a family of scenes have in common in order to be called a family? **Answer:** In order to be a family, a group of scenes must have in common two things: (1) similar affects and (2) similar objects of those similar affects.

FOR EXAMPLE: There could be a family of scenes in which all the scenes contain anger and fear (the similar affects) toward authority figures (the similar objects.) The word SCENE also means something special in script theory. Everybody knows that a scene is an event in which something happens as in a movie scene. In script theory a scene that is available for scripting (a “scriptable” scene, so to speak) must be part of a family of scenes *and it must have two more features*. Other than being part of a family of scenes, what two additional features must a scene have in order to be scriptable? The two additional features of a scriptable scene are: (1) it must have *intense affect* and (2) it must be a scene that is *consequential*.

I know what *intense affect* means, but what does *consequential* mean? **Answer:** A consequential scene is a scene in which there occurs a *sharp change* in affect. What do you mean by “sharp change” in affect? **Answer:** A sharp change means that the affect in the scene makes a large change during the scene in either the *quantity* or *quality* of affect. That is, a scene is consequential if either (1) the *type* of intense affect in the scene changes or (2) the *amount* of affect changes a lot or (3) both the type and the amount of affect change a lot.

So: A script is a set of rules used to interpret—or to give oneself instructions about what to do or think or feel—with respect to a scene that is part of a family of scenes. In order for a scene to be scriptable it must be part of a family of similar scenes that are similar with respect to the affects and the objects of those affects in the family of scenes. In addition, the family of scenes interpreted with a script rule must be a set of scenes in which intense affect is involved and in which the affect changes sharply through the scene in either the amount of affect (quantity of affect) or the type of affect (quality of affect.) This sharp change in affect quantity or quality is called the consequential feature of the scenes in a family.

The Rules Of A Script May Or May Not Do A Good Job Of Interpreting A Family Of Scenes In The Sense That The Rules May Or May Not Be Workable Guidelines For Solving Problems Associated With The Family Of Scenes.

When we form script rules to interpret what happens to us, our purpose in forming such rules (in “writing our scripts”) is *always to solve a problem*. I'll give some examples of problems to solve: How do I get rid of this shame? How can I find more safety from things that upset me? What

will make this hassle not feel so bad? What's a good way to prolong my fun? What will make me immune to death? How can I stay alive in this terrifying place? How should I live my life? When I want to be comforted, what can I do? What can I think about so I don't feel this way? And so on. The solution sought may be a solution to a problem that is posed by the scene's information as in, say, seeking a solution to humiliation in a scene in which one is subjected to humiliating treatment.

The Big Snare!!

The big snare is this: The solution sought may not be the solution found.

It can happen that what we hope to find by way of a solution does not occur or occurs only briefly and is then followed by something worse. Despite the difficulty of our sometimes ending up with scripts that do not find the solution we seek, we still "believe" in our scripts. The scare quotes around the word "believe" in the above sentence is meant to show that the belief is implicit even if not explicit. That is, if we keep our scripts, then no matter how well or how poorly they solve the problem they were invented to solve, we apparently "believe" they are nonetheless a good procedural guide to solving the problem for which a solution is sought.

For example, the *attack-other* script is actually an ineffectual procedural guide to solving the problem of having to manage shame and humiliation. For a brief moment the other-attacker may feel anger in place of shame-humiliation, and this appears briefly to solve the attacker's shame problem. But this anger may then be followed by worse humiliation in having created more problems from the attack. If, despite this failure of the script to solve the problem it was designed to solve, it is nonetheless kept as someone's shame-management script. It would appear that the person implicitly believes the script is solving the problem. This leads us to ask why scripts are relatively so immune to correction.

Scripts and Immunity To Correction

Script rules—because they are implicitly believed to be good procedural guides to solving a problem despite evidence to the contrary and because they possess automaticity outside of consciousness—are more or less immune to correction. In effect there are two fundamental things that create a relative immunity of script rules to correction:

- 1) The rules operate with a high degree of automaticity. Thus, the conditions under which one's script rules were first formed is lost to memory. And the rules themselves may never have been made too explicit in consciousness—just as many persons do not recall when they learned their grammar/language rules and have never bothered to make explicit in their own consciousness the grammar/language rules they use every day.
- 2) The rules now exist for the purpose of validating themselves as much as they exist to solve the problem for which they were originally designed.

This means that script rules become self-fulfilling prophecies and may thereby become self-validating. For example, if I think I'm a jerk because of a script, and I treat myself as a jerk and expect others to do the same, my behavior is seldom becoming or endearing but instead tends to put people off. When they are put off I can justify my continuing belief that I must be a jerk.

Script rules can also act as self-negating prophecies and thereby, ironically, also reinforce a script rule. For example, if I think I am a super-good driver who is immune to accidents and then drive recklessly, I am more likely to negate my prediction of immunity to accidents by getting into an accident after a spell of reckless driving. But because I am so convinced that I

must be a great driver, accident or not, the accident only proves that a great driver like me should strive to be an even greater driver who takes even more dangerous risks to prove that despite the accident I am immune after all. So my next accident is more severe; but if I again survive, I only prove again how really immune I am in not having been killed.

Script rules can thus be fortified by elaborate cognitive gymnastics in order to preserve them. Some script rules can live on even though they were originally formed to solve a problem that they do a poor job of solving. Script rules can be said to be too efficient—they force to a low number a ratio of very few rules to cover too many potential scenes.

In sum: We the people, in order to create excessive efficiency in our problem-solving rules, will adopt actions, feelings, and thoughts more suited to keeping intact our faith in these rules than suited to solve the problems the rules are purportedly designed to solve. Ineffectual script rules try to solve problems (or conflicts or to fulfill needs or desires), but instead replicate our past experiences and *impede* our responsiveness to the novelties and possibilities of *new* scenes.

Here is probably the most important concept in script theory—*affect magnification*.

Affect Magnification

No Script Can Ever Be Formed Without Some Kind Of Glue Or Force Or Power To Impress Upon Us The Importance Of The Rules In Our Script And To Motivate Us To Act On Those Rules.

Affect magnification is the glue that makes our script rules stick together and stick to us and move us to act on our scripts. First, a review . . . We know that affects amplify the stimulation patterns of events that happen. For instance, if there is too much stimulation coming at us, the affect of distress begins to be felt and is itself an *amplification* of the too much stimulation coming at us. Distress, like all the negative affects, thus makes a bad situation worse. A negative affect *amplifies* a bad situation. OK, so much for amplification. Now what is this business of affect *magnification*? Why are we using the word “magnification” now instead of “amplification”? The answer is that we want to keep a special word handy, “magnification,” to refer specifically to the affect that we feel when we are going about our narrative review of a family of scenes while forming our script rules.

So what is a *magnifying affect*?

- 1) It's the affect we feel during a narrative review in consciousness of a family of scenes as we write our script rules for interpreting the scenes and instructing ourselves on what to do, think, and feel in relation to this family of scenes.
- 2) It's one of the nine “basic affects” (i.e., the basic nine includes the affect auxiliary of shame-humiliation and the drive auxiliaries of dissmell and disgust.)
- 3) It is the glue that holds our rules together and makes them very important to us. If we had no affect, nothing would ever matter. No rule can matter unless it is embedded in some affective experience.
- 4) It is the fire in the furnace of consciousness that warms and gives energy to [motivates] the cognitions contained in our script rules. Script rules have no energy to motivate us without something to power them. Magnifying affect powers [motivates] our script rules. Magnifying affect makes our scripts into hot cognitions—makes our rules very important to us, important enough to act on them.

Example One:

A child is making a narrative review of a family of scenes in which excitement is followed by terror in relation to some object, and while reviewing this family of scenes in consciousness he is feeling humiliated. Humiliation is the magnifying affect, the affect that gives great importance and motivating power to the rules the child will formulate as his instructions for dealing with situations wherein excitement is followed by terror. The child may tell himself, "When you are excited, you should never let anyone know it and try to never get excited again. That way you may avoid the terror or nobody will know if you are terrified. If you happen to get excited again, hate yourself and apologize to everyone. And keep the terror a secret if it happens." Under the heat of humiliation the child views these scenes as a grave threat to his self-regard.

Example Two:

Now imagine that same child in a narrative review of the same family of scenes in which excitement is followed by terror in relation to the same object. But this time the magnifying affect is interest. The child's narrative review is filled with curiosity. The rules the child formulates to interpret this situation will be very different under the heat of the magnifying affect of interest. The child may create the following hypothetical script rules: "Wow, that sure was scary! Fascinating! I wonder if I would come out alive if I did that again. The excitement sure was fun, but the terror was frighteningly different. Could this happen to me again in just this way? I hope not, but you never know. I wonder if I could find a place where I can have fun without this dangerous creep always bugging me to stifle it or else he'll kill me. That terrorist needs to get a life. I'm going to avoid people who seem so miserable that they want to spoil our fun with this kind of terrorism."

These examples are surely caricatures designed only to make two points: (1) magnifying affects make our rules matter to us and (2) the very character of the rules themselves is partly determined by the particular magnifying affect that is present when we create our script rules. We could imagine the kinds of DIFFERENT rules (scripts) a child might devise under the magnifying affect of distress or enjoyment or surprise or just shame (rather than humiliation) or under the magnifying affect of rage. Or, what would the script look like under the magnifying affect-complex of terror and humiliation? Or, how about the magnifying affect-complex of terror-humiliation-rage!! This is the narrative review perhaps of a severely abused child. What a tragic plight! The rules of a script come out very, very differently depending on what the magnifying affect is at the time of script formation.

Where Do Magnifying Affects Come From?

So what determines what affect is active during a script formation? Sometimes it's just luck! Whatever affect happens to be active during a narrative review can determine the script that results. Often the affect that magnifies is one of the affects in the scene being interpreted. The affect of the scenes being reviewed, that is, may be so strong that it spills over into everything one thinks about when reviewing the problematic scenes. Often you cannot know what affect must have been active during the formation of a script until after that script is well formed and on its way to becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Dave McShane has spelled out so neatly.

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